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## Reconceptualizing Intercultural Competence: A Phenomenological Investigation of Students' Intercultural Experiences

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the notion of intercultural competence from the perspective of students in a Malaysian university. In-depth interviews involving fifteen culturally diverse students were conducted. Students reflected their lived experiences with cultural others and shared their perceptions of competent communication. Using phenomenological analysis of the interview data, two core themes that encompass intercultural competence emerged: acquiring cultural understanding and respecting cultural differences. These core themes indicate that intercultural competence is viewed as a relational process that must include both communication partners to mutually achieve appropriate and effective behaviors. The findings contribute into rethinking the Western perspective by bringing forth a relational perspective into the corpus of intercultural competence.

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**Keywords:** Intercultural competence; phenomenology; intercultural interaction; cultural context; western perspective

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### 1. Introduction

Intercultural competence in the literature has been used interchangeably with such modifiers as multicultural or cross cultural competence, cultural learning, global competence, cross cultural knowledge, intercultural understanding, cross-cultural adjustment, cross-cultural adaptation, cross-cultural effectiveness, cultural competence,

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and cross cultural awareness (Lough, 2010). Amongst the terms, “intercultural competence,” or “intercultural communication competence” are most frequently used in the discourse due to their reflective relationship with communication competence concepts (Deardorff, 2004; Fantini, 2009). Given the plethora of choices for definitions of intercultural competence, Deardorff’s (2004) study is helpful to shed some foundational understanding of this construct. Deardorff conducted a study that document consensus among intercultural experts and based on the data generated from a Delphi study, intercultural competence is defined as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p.184).

## 2. Intercultural competence and the western bias

Although Deardorff’s (2004) study provides the strongest available definition of intercultural competence (LaRocco, 2011), Deardorff remarked that the experts in her study comprised primarily Western scholars holding Western values which may be contrary to other cultures. The Western perspective has been argued for its limitation to sufficiently bringing forth cultural particularities in conceptualizing intercultural competence (Chen, 2009). This assertion points to a caveat in adopting Western models in other cultural contexts. As such, researchers need to be cognizant with the ontological standpoint of intercultural competence that underscores Western perspective. Liu (2012) proposed that effectiveness and appropriateness form the core concept of intercultural competence. The ontological stance of effectiveness or the achievement of valued goals derives from the notion of control (Parks, 1994). Personal control is central to many Western models of competence reflecting the accomplishment of valued objectives that rest within a single individual (Chen, 2009). Hence, competent communicators are considered as those who are able to co-orient and coordinate their behaviors (verbal and non-verbal) to accomplish personal goals as well as fitting themselves in the expectation of a given situation (Parks, 1994; Wiseman, 2003). Appropriateness reflects politeness and is defined as “the avoidance of violating social or interpersonal norms, rules, or expectations” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, p. 7). In order to know what is appropriate, a communicator needs to identify the rules of a given situation. His or her sense of what is acceptable and unacceptable provides the knowledge to perform what behavior follows or violate rules in a given context.

Deardorff (2009) remarked that the unit of analysis for intercultural competence in non-Western cultures is often placed on interpersonal relationship, which is in mark contrast to Western models that place more emphasis on the individual. Such emphasis on relational aspects is further pronounced in several non-Western perspectives in the literature. For example, Yum (2012) proposed that communication competence from Korean perspective is not about one’s ability to control others but to harmonize with others. As such, communication competence is achieved when interpersonal relationships become harmonious in that all parties maintain appropriate relationships instead of being driven by personal goals. Xiao and Chen (2012) proposed that Chinese perspective of harmony is the key to competent communication. Such emphasis leads Chinese to pursue group oriented system of human relations. Miyahara (2004) asserted that assertiveness by presenting feelings to others is viewed as an important communication skill in the West. However, presenting one’s feelings is difficult in Japanese culture as it deteriorates the value of harmony. Rather, one’s ability of not clearly presenting one’s feelings is viewed as a sign of social competence in Japanese culture. Yum (2012) pointed that the conception of competence within relational framework does not suggest it is exclusive to non-Western cultures. Relational competence involving the co-creation and collaboration between individuals has also been noted in many Western models of intercultural competence. Although relationship is developed, the emphasis on personal goal still pervades Western models. In view of this, competent communication is oriented toward getting what one wants from a relationship in mutually acceptable ways.

Yep (2014) remarked that current understanding of intercultural competence is still permeated by Western perspective. Given the inadequacies of Western perspective to capture other ways of viewing intercultural competence, calls have been made for more investigations that move beyond the Western standpoint (see Syarizan, 2011). Nonetheless, the argument on inadequacies of Western models does not mean discounting the value of Eurocentric scholarship; rather it points to the fact that Western scholars’ lens in viewing the phenomenon of intercultural competence must be re-considered before they can be fully adopted. Without such re-consideration, researchers may run the risk of misinterpreting behaviors of another culture when using the Western standard (Chen & Miike, 2006).

Given the need to re-think the Western concept of intercultural competence; a Malaysian campus offers a meaningful site for such an investigation. The internalization process of Malaysian higher education has brought along an immense number of culturally diverse students, locally and internationally. Hence, the campus site is regarded as a natural setting for students to experience everyday interactions with cultural others. Such lived experiences provide a unique opportunity to examine the meaning of competence from the students' perspective. Accordingly, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- How do students experience interaction with cultural others?
- What does intercultural competence mean to students with diverse experiences?

### **3. The research focus**

As this study aims to interrogate the phenomenon of intercultural competence within students' lived intercultural experiences, phenomenology is an appropriate approach. Van Manen (1990) proposed that phenomenology seeks to gain deeper understanding by describing one's experiential meanings in his or her everyday existence. Accordingly, researching lived experience is retrospective since it is a reflection of one's consciousness of the experience that one lived through. It is crucial to note that phenomenology is a philosophical tradition comprising a number of thinkers (Giorgi, 2000). Cohen and Omery (1994) noted that although the thinkers shared similar basic grounding of phenomenology, they are extraordinarily diverse in their interpretations of the phenomenon and applications of phenomenological methods. Choices made by the researcher to which phenomenological school of thought to utilize gives implications toward his or her methodological framework on the phenomenon under inquiry. As such, it is important for the researcher to be mindful about the thinkers' belief of reality underlying their phenomenological approach.

Given the arguments made on limitation of Western perspective to capture cultural particularities, little is known as to how intercultural competence is perceived within Malaysian setting. Based on this assertion, this study approaches the phenomenon of intercultural competence through descriptive phenomenological approach. This methodological framework follows through Husserl's philosophical tradition that aims to interrogate a phenomenon as it appears in human consciousness rather than as it is theorized (Giorgi, 2000; Lindolf & Taylor, 2011; Van Manen, 1990). In such a tradition, descriptive phenomenological researchers are committed to describe a phenomenon as it is lived by participants rather than imposing a predetermined theoretical framework (Cohen & Omery, 1994; Giorgi, 2000; Moustakas, 1994). This approach seems to be appropriate for this study to elucidate conceptions of intercultural competence that moves beyond the Western standard.

#### *3.1. The research setting and participants*

The research setting for this study is a public university in the northern region of Malaysia. Local students constitute approximately 29 thousand of the statistic, and another two thousand plus more are international students coming from mostly Asian and African countries including Indonesia, Thailand, China, Somalia, Jordan, Yemen, and Nigeria. Participants for this study involved culturally diverse groups of local and non-local postgraduate students who have had the experience of interaction with cultural others in the campus. Their selection is based on the assumption that postgraduate students may possess adequate experience interacting with cultural others within higher education. In addition, they have reached a certain level of maturity that would allow them to be able to articulate their lived experiences more fully.

#### *3.2. Data collection method and data analysis*

In-depth interviews were used to collect data from participants. Since all people have the innate ability to narrate in their own ways, in-depth interviews provide an opportunity for participants to tell their stories that help them to illustrate and shape their understandings of a phenomenon (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). This study specifically adopts Seidman's (2006) structure of phenomenological interviews that orient participants (i) to reflect their life history in light of the topic, (ii) to provide details of their experience and (iii) to reflect the meaning of their experience. Taking

this structure, participants were asked to provide previous intercultural experiences they had before becoming postgraduate students. Then the participants were asked to recall several incidents and the meanings that they impart to their experiences which assist their views on intercultural competence. In locating participants who met the established criteria for an in-depth interview, this study utilized a snowballing sampling. The sampling is categorized into two chains in which one includes representative of local students and the other represents non-local students. Sampling began with a participant who then referred the researcher to other students like themselves for research participation. The interview ceased when saturation of data was reached and resulting in fifteen culturally diverse participants being interviewed with Malaysians being the majority and the others include Nigerians, Indonesians, a Jordanian, a Palestinian and a Chinese. This number of participant was sufficient to elucidate rigorous analysis of the phenomenon under study (Moustakas, 1994). A rigorous and systematic step of phenomenological data analysis by Moustakas (1994) was followed to analyze data from the interviews. Using the Nvivo 10 software, the data were coded into themes that emerged through participants' voices rather a predetermined theoretical framework of intercultural competence. The emergent themes were then compared to existing Western perspective and relevant literature.

#### 4. Findings

As participants reflected their experiences with cultural others, the following themes that illuminate intercultural competence were observed: (i) acquiring cultural understanding and (ii) respecting cultural differences

##### 4.1. Acquiring cultural understanding

Participants described that intercultural experiences provide them with valuable insights as to how their standpoints on what is "right" or "acceptable" in life is likely to be different from others. For example, a Jordanian participant shared his experience that head patting is considered "a friendly joking" among the Arabs and similar behavior is viewed as "rude" by the Malaysians. Accordingly, participants felt that competent communication must begin with an understanding of their own cultural beliefs, values, and worldviews vis-à-vis that of cultural others. In acquiring cultural understanding, a Chinese participant suggested that it is important to find reasons as to why people from other cultures behave in certain ways which lead them to "be able to understand differences." Additionally, participants pointed that acquiring cultural understanding does not take place during the first encounter. Rather, it consumes time as participants try to understand "how culture works." For example, a Malaysian participant commented:

*When I start my master's degree...I actually work together with others. At first we have to really understand the culture first and the way of working to mould the thing together. So it takes time.*

Interestingly, participants viewed cultural understanding as a mutual process that necessitates both sides to learn from each other about their differences. Without such mutuality, participants felt that achieving intercultural competence is unlikely. For example, an Indonesian participant expressed:

*If we want to develop good communication...we learn from one another. If we are not able to have mutual understanding so we are not competent. So the point is mutual understanding....if we have mutual understanding of tradition and culture...ours are like this...Theirs are like that we understand and do not force others to follow us.*

##### 4.2. Respecting cultural differences

The participants expressed that their experiences has made them become aware that people from different cultures may have their own unique ways of living their life. As such, they felt that it is important to respect by acknowledging the rights of others to practice their own cultural ways. For example, a Jordanian participant recalled an incident where he was surprised when the Malaysians used a hand gesture (showing palm outward to signal

STOP) in which he interpreted as “rude” within his Arab culture. Because he was able to eventually respect such differences, he managed to avoid from thinking such behaviors as “bad” since “it is their culture.” Accordingly, participants commented that respecting others by acknowledging “who they are” as cultured individuals is critical for achieving intercultural competence. Displaying respect for cultural differences enables participants to recognize that although they can hardly comprehend others’ cultural ways; their realities of the world need to be valued. A Palestinian participant remarked:

*You have to respect other culture. Accept the people whatever their religion or culture because they're human. You can open and attract other people to interact with you. Respect their culture, religion, custom...everything...with respect you can't change them.*

Interestingly, participants felt that respect necessitates both sides to mutually acknowledge cultural differences. The need for mutual respect is vividly represented in regard to religious positions. Participants noted that it is important to recognize each others’ religious positions since they are considered “a sacred territory” in which participants chose to maintain. Interestingly, respecting such territory does not cause much conflict for participants and enables them to relate well with cultural others. An exemplary of mutual respect can be observed in another Malaysian participant’s response:

*I have to attend prayers in my house during Thaipusam. During that time they said they will have discussion. I want to go home because I have prayers. They said it's okay. We'll do next time. Or maybe we'll do first and later we'll explain to you. Same thing goes to me because when they said it's time to buka puasa (Iftar), I want to do the gathering, but they said no, cannot. We want to pray first then later on we do the gathering. I said it's ok. They respect us then we have to respect them.*

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings reveal the important elements of intercultural competence from the students’ perspective. The core themes that emerged from the data analysis essentially bring forth participants’ consciousness of encountering cultural differences. It was evident in the findings that the presence of cultural others led participants to make sense of how culture influences their communication behaviors. Accordingly, participants felt it is crucial to acquire cultural understanding of who they are as cultured individuals and respecting their differences.

The finding of “acquiring cultural understanding” concurs with the literature that indicated intercultural competence necessitates individuals to have self awareness on how culture influences their behaviors as well as that of others (Deardorff, 2004). It was evident in the findings that participants developed cultural self awareness as it occurs through their intercultural experiences. The finding of “respecting cultural differences” reinforces the literature that indicates its critical importance for developing intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009; LaRocco, 2011). This finding further confirms the literature on respecting cultural differences to which it is not necessarily indicate agreement with other cultures as people by nature carry their own cultural baggage in perceiving their external world, but judgment of others is not based on one cultural standpoint (Lustig & Koester, 2010).

While the Western discourse indicated the locus of competency tend to reside within a single individual, the findings show that intercultural competence is viewed in a relational sense that necessitates both communication partners to mutually understand and respect each other’s cultural standpoints. Without such condition, achieving appropriate and effective communication is unlikely. Given this condition, this study suggests that intercultural competence is a co-created process between both interlocutors in interaction that are viewed as interdependent beings. What appears to be important for participants is to develop mutual dependent connection with cultural others. The findings of this study are congruent with extant non-Western perspectives in the literature that indicate relational aspect as an important aspect of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009). More interestingly, the finding of respect as it regards to mutual acknowledgement of religious positions provides phenomenological evidence that religion matters in participants’ existence with cultural others. This finding substantiates the literature that pointed religion plays a significant role in a majority of Malaysian people especially for the Malays where the

Islamic faith forms a core part of their beings (Shamsul, 1996). Although the literature indicated that adaptation is crucial for becoming competent (Deardorff, 2004), this study suggests that it is not always the means for people to work with differences. Rather, intercultural competence considers a mutual process of respecting each other's differences that enables both sides to retain their religious positions.

The implication of this study is that it draws attention to a relational perspective in defining intercultural competence, which is a noted gap in the existing Western models. As Deardorff (2009) has made the call for more focus on relational aspects in future models of intercultural competence, this study contributes into providing phenomenological evidence on the specificities needed for intercultural participants to relate well with one another. Since this study considers students' reflection of their lived experiences, it does not observe how competent behaviors are enacted in actual intercultural situations. Future researchers may observe how intercultural participants appropriately and effectively manage interactions in real situations. What actually took place when people of different cultures interact to achieve appropriate and effective outcomes? Findings from such research would be beneficial into delineating the workings of relational competency in actual situations, in particular, when using such a skill to interact with diverse others in daily situations.

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